DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 286 195 CS 210 802

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TITLE A Glimpse into the Thinking of Young New Zealanders.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Symposium on IEA Study of Written Composition at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Washington, DC, April 20-24, 1987). For a related document, see CS 210 801.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Achievement Tests; Essays; Expository Writing; Foreign Countries; *Personal Narratives; Secondary Education; *Student Attitudes; *Writing Evaluation; *Writing Skills; Written Language
IDENTIFIERS Audience Awareness; *Author Text Relationship; International Evaluation Education Achievement; *New Zealand; Writing Attitudes; Writing Patterns; Writing Tasks

ABSTRACT

In 1984, New Zealand tested 12- and 13- year-old and 15- and 16-year old students as part of the International Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) tests. Although weaknesses appeared at both age levels in the organization of material, particularly in argumentative and expository writing, students could write functional letters competently and demonstrated an originality and freshness of voice in personal narratives. In expository essay writing, students wrote, in a generally pessimistic vein, about global issues such as the nuclear debate, as well as school issues. The personal narrative provided a means for students to organize and interpret their experiences, to write about themselves and their relationships, to record their present and anticipate their future. One aspect of their world that was examined was the roles students took for themselves. Sex role stereotypes played little part in this--although boys still wrote about adventurous outdoor activities, girls also wrote about camping, daring rescues, and demanding sporting events. Boys usually wrote about pitting themselves aggressively against formidable opposition, while girls tended to concentrate on beating their own personal standards. The narrative settings were usually domestic and local for the older writers. The younger writers used exotic, imaginary settings more frequently, often derived from television or fantasy games. Family members reflected "traditional" sex-linked behavior, but considerable sensitivity was displayed in discussing family tensions and social pressures on adolescents. With this maturity came a parallel sense of audience in the writer's recognition of the reader's perceptive. (NKA)

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ED 286195

SYMPOSIUM:
IEA STUDY OF WRITTEN COMPOSITION:
REPORTS FROM FOUR COUNTRIES

A GLIMPSE INTO THE THINKING OF YOUNG NEW ZEALANDERS

Hilary Lamb

Paper presented at the AERA Annual Meeting
April 20 - 24
Washington D C

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A glimpse into the thinking of young New Zealanders

In September/October 1984, New Zealand tested two population groups, form 2, aged 12-13, (equivalent to Grade 6) , and form 5, aged 15-16, (equivalent to Grade 10). The achieved samples were approximately 2300 students and 2500 students respectively. From each age level 100 schools were selected, to include a range of school types, urban and rural, state and private, co-educational and single sex schools from the far north to the remote south.

It is not within the scope of this paper to give a complete analysis of New Zealand's performance scores. In general terms, however, results pointed to some areas which need development.

Weaknesses were apparent at both age levels in the organisation of material, particularly in argumentative, reflective or persuasive writing. There seemed little awareness that the way one structures ideas is as much a strategy of argument and debate as the ideas themselves. The same lack of organisational skills was sometimes seen in descriptive writing also.

Neither form 2 nor form 5 students seemed to feel comfortable with expository or reflective essay tasks respectively. Writers from the younger population often had difficulties generating sufficient relevant content,

and lacked the appropriate problem-solving techniques to help them do this. For students who had obviously struggled to find ideas and arguments, organisation, style, spelling and grammar were also weak. Content accessibility is an important factor for success in writing, as it may be that lack of content accessibility also depresses performance across other dimensions of writing.

The good news is that our students write functional letters competently, and have an originality and freshness of voice in personal narratives. In this genre, students demonstrated their understanding of the essential form of the narrative, at times with some sophistication and subtlety. Form 2 students in particular seemed ready to experiment with language and to develop a sense of audience in these tasks. Just how good this news is may depend on international results and comparisons which may not be available until 1988. Early findings from the English sample suggest similar patterns and levels of performance.

Data from student questionnaires showed that reading was a favourite pastime of friends for 31% of form 2 and 17% of form 5 students. Yet a quarter of form 2 and nearly half of form 5 students disliked reading. Recent research into reading instruction in New Zealand (Elley, 1985) suggests that a dislike of reading begins early in some students' schooling, and that most of these students are boys. However, just under half the students surveyed claimed that they spent four hours or more per week on leisure reading.

Reaction against writing was also more marked in form 5. This is not surprising considering that data on frequent writing activities in class for English and other subjects showed that for an overwhelming majority of these students, (83%) copying from the blackboard or overhead projector was the single most frequent writing activity.

Yet responses to other questions show that other writing activities were enjoyed. The favourite composition topics for 12 year old students were adventure stories, sports and hobbies, and imaginative or fantasy topics. Fifteen year old students ranked analysing social or moral problems and giving opinions highest, then adventure and descriptive writing.

Least liked topics or essay types were writing for other subjects, and descriptive writing in form 2, poetry writing, and personal thoughts on art, music or literature in form 5.

It will come as no surprise to learn that some topics occur frequently on both the Most Liked lists and the Most Disliked lists.

Many students also listed writing activities among their leisure activities - writing letters, stories, playing word games, or keeping a diary or journal.

The most frequent daily leisure activity reported within the family was not having meals together but watching television. If student responses are to be believed, 1 in 10 form 2 students were watching between seven and eight hours a day on a school day, and 1 in 3 in holidays and weekends. Viewing figures were lower for form 5 students, with 3% watching 7-8 hours on a school day, and 16% in weekends or holidays. Figures supplied by IRIS, the audience research division of the Broadcasting Corporation of New Zealand, for a similar viewing period are more conservative but the implications of younger students watching television from the time they arrive home from school until closedown are that such children are tired from consistently late nights, and are replacing reading, hobbies, physical exercise, and peer or family activities with passive viewing. Nor does it appear that television programmes are discussed frequently within the family, although recent research in Australia (Palmer, 1986) indicates that it forms the major part of peer group conversation, particularly among girls.

If this is the world students described within the relatively narrow confines of a questionnaire designed to be applicable across fourteen different countries and educational systems, we need to examine the world they described when the choices were wider, and the ideas were their own.

In the expository essay, students were given a free choice of any issue or problem about which they felt strongly. New Zealand raters kept a tally of the content in these essays from both population levels, a total of 840 scripts. I have discussed on other occasions [1] the frequency with which New Zealand students wrote on the nuclear disarmament question, and the overwhelmingly pessimistic viewpoints they expressed. The interest in the nuclear debate was no doubt stimulated by the screening on television of Threads and the related BBC docu-drama on a nuclear winter, On the Eighth Day, a week before testing took place. It was also clear that these essays used significantly better arguments and factual content material than essays on unemployment or parents. We still have no international results which would show whether this interest in global problems rather than personal problems is shared by students in other countries in the survey. Other New Zealand studies, (eg McSweeney 1985) seem to indicate that the prospect of a post-holocaust world is a continuing concern to students.

An equally negative attitude was held by the students who addressed school issues in this task, (nearly a quarter of the responses). However, the timing of the testing programme (just after 2-3 weeks of holiday and, for fifth formers, just before major state examinations) and the anonymity of student responses, may have encouraged students to vent their feelings about perceived injustices. Yet when writing in a further essay task on what would

happen if students were to be given more control over what they studied and how they studied, the fifteen year old students who chose this option had little to say, and few suggestions. They seemed to believe that the iron rule of teacher discipline was the only incentive to study, and thus the only method of gaining examination success. Few suggested alternative subjects, alternative school systems, or open access to other centres of learning. There was little discussion of alternative assessment methods, or of individual programmes negotiated by a student with a course supervisor. The status quo was begrudgingly defended, in contrast to many student submissions to the Ministerial Review of Curriculum in Schools, in 1986.[2]

The apparent pessimism which emerged in the students' views of their world may suggest a student community full of doom and dread. Yet the rubric may have prompted a negative stance ("Choose an issue or problem"), as would many of the topics themselves. Can we expect adolescents to be positive about death, unemployment, a nuclear winter or cruelty to animals? Were such subjects easier to write about given their topicality and media coverage? To what extent are these attitudes reinforced by current teenage literature in leisure reading or in texts studied in class? Do class discussions concentrate on negative aspects of our world more than positive gains or hopes for the future?

The personal narrative in particular provided a means for students to organise and interpret their experiences, to

write about themselves and their relationships, to record their present and anticipate the future.

One aspect of their world which this essay allowed us to examine was the roles students took for themselves in narrating a key episode in their lives, with the emphasis on the real world. The different attitudes and expectations of male and female roles which that world has, or the world derived from reading, films or television might be expected to emerge in the students' characterisation in their stories, in images and patterns of behaviour, in the settings in which they placed themselves and others, and in the content and outcome of the episode described.

Generally, the sex role stereotypes of adventurous male and fearful, passive or protected female, the Action Man/Barbie Doll contrast, were minority roles in the writing of New Zealand students. An analysis of a ten percent random sub-sample of narrative essays at form 2 and form 5 levels, (approximately 200 Population A and 100 Population B scripts), showed that boys did write frequently of adventurous activities, especially of the hunting, shooting and fishing type, but girls were just as involved in tramping, camping or boating activities, in daring rescues, escapes from attackers, or in demanding sporting events. Both sexes explored new surroundings, faced danger or fear, fought bullies, or strove to better sports records,

individually or in groups. Girls and boys were depicted as both rescuer and rescued.

Sports and outdoor leisure activities featured prominently in the narratives of both sexes, in both age groups. There was a slight tendency for males to write of team sports, and females of individual sports. Where boys were involved in individual sporting events, they wrote of "thrashing [an] opponent", "a duel to the death", of "fighting like a mad dog to overpower [him]", that is of pitting themselves aggressively against tough opposition. Girls tended to concentrate on beating their own personal standards, or improving on first tentative efforts such as in learning to water-ski or wind-surf, or of training for a sports event. They also included a wider range of personal challenges, including art, music, speech or dancing examinations or competitions, and even losing weight.

Horses played a very large part in the dreams and aspirations of girls especially the younger form 2 girls. Just over one in ten essays by form 2 girls featured horses. By form 5 the emphasis was less on eventually having a pony of one's own than on coping with an unbroken or runaway horse.

The male equivalent seemed to be owning a motorbike, or with younger writers, a BMX. Ownership of a bike entailed as much grooming and care as in owning a horse; there were contests which matched rodeos and gymkhanas for challenge

and excitement. But possession of a bike or motorbike seemed to bring boys a greater freedom to move away from home environments, to explore surroundings, or to visit thermal spa pools, video parlours and other leisure centres, without family supervision.

The settings of the narratives tended to be domestic and local for both sexes, increasingly so with older writers. Because these narratives were drawn from personal experience, incidents took place at home , school, the farm, or on family holidays at beaches, mountains, lakes or in the countryside. In form 5 essays, even imagined episodes such as landslides or bloodthirsty fights took place with the family or peer group as protagonists. The outcomes of these incidents were logical and realistic.

In contrast, form 2 writers used exotic, imagined settings more frequently, often derived from television, Dungeons and Dragons, fantasy adventure games in books or on computers, and Tolkien type romances. Such fantasies, and science fiction odysseys, war, murder hunts and kidnappings were most popular with boys. The writer often assumed the person of an older leader of a group such as an army platoon, or the crew of a space-ship. Accordingly, outcomes were miraculous, resolved either by superhuman powers, or by the writer escaping through waking from a dream.

Although girls also assumed leadership roles when writing on these fantasy themes, they were more likely to act alone. Their war scenes were often projections of a future war, rather than drawn from World War II, and again expressed a fear of a nuclear future, and a post-holocaust world.

Whether the settings were real or imagined, and in some contrast to the roles students took for themselves, the characteristics of family members reflected "traditional" sex-typed behaviour. Mum prepared meals while Dad loaded up the fishing or camping gear. Mum also had the special task of waking children from a nightmare just as the monster or attacker was about to deal the fatal blow. Essays from both sexes at both age levels showed joint decision making, and shared participation in family outings.

Although the need for both sexes to gain the mother's approval or to appease her anger was strong, it was with the father that stern authority and discipline resided.

The role of rescuer fell equally to mother or father (and many narratives reflected a single parent family), or to male or female relatives. Often, perhaps because Mum was on the spot at home, she was the first to be called to an emergency, although Dad, or an older brother might carry out the rescue operation.

The female characters also played a nurturing role, providing refuge, comfort and friendship for children (and animals) needing support.

At form 2 level, boys more than girls chose to write about helping at home with domestic chores, but by form 5 the domestic duties had become more adult, especially on farms,with boys taking more responsible roles in mustering and moving stock, clearing scrub, or tree-felling, especially in rural situations. In outdoor pursuits, too, male writers showed that they had moved to join adult male groups hunting wild goats, deer or pigs, or on fishing trips. This was also apparent in their expert knowledge of the activity.

Form 5 narratives showed an increased awareness in both girls and boys of the feelings and motives of family members. This was very apparent in accounts of tensions in the home, of separation and divorce and the difficulty of choosing which parent to stay with, and of the needs of the lonely or the elderly. Writers at this age explored the intentions of all the parties involved. There was similar sensitivity and introspection in facing the death of friends, the pressures of examinations, and the tensions of losing or making friendships.

These new friendships figured more frequently in girls' writing at form 2. Both sexes described new friendships with members of the opposite sex, but by form 5, there was

a greater awareness of the demands of friendship and of sharing the personal anxieties of adolescence, and more subtlety in judging true friendship on more than outward appearance. Form 2 writers asked a loner "Will you be my friend?" and were immediately accepted. Form 5 writers often established tentative links first, explored and analysed the reactions of the peer group, and were very aware that friendships with members of opposite sex had sexual and emotional implications of dating and serious relationships. Only in form 2 girls' writing (in the sub-sample analysed) did such friendships lead to (idealised) marriage and children.

With increasing social sensitivity came a parallel sense of audience in the writer's recognition of the reader's perspective through explanations and background information.

Two aspects of the real world became very prominent in narratives of fifth form boys. One was the presence of beer and social drinking at male gatherings, whether a dance or a fishing trip. Often the dangerous episode which formed the basis of the narrative arose from the characters' judgement being impaired by alcohol.

The second was the incidence of car and motorbike injuries and fatalities. Whereas younger male writers described imagined plane crashes or trains being derailed, there was instead a sense of realism and experience in the recounting

of car chases and road accidents, particularly considering that at this age, the writers are in the high risk group (15-24 years) for such accidents. Where form 2 writers had nightmares about being attacked by murderers or monsters, (Jungian and Freudian analysts would find a wealth of data in these essays on dreams), fifth formers' dreams predicted accidents, or showed car and motorbike chases.

It seems, then, that New Zealand adolescents' views of their world projected less sex-stereotyped roles for themselves and their friends in their activities, although parental roles were more fixed. Perhaps our outdoor living style, and increased awareness in our schools of the restrictions of sexist attitudes, texts and roles have contributed to this apparent freedom of some students to move beyond sex-roles that are stereotyped and restrictive.

Are our students unique, different from those in other participating countries? As yet we don't know. But what we do know is that our students showed imagination, a freshness and honesty of voice, and a sense of humour. Kenneth Grahame, the author of <u>The Wind in the Willows</u> wrote in an essay "Secret Kingdoms" in 1896 of the secret worlds of children's imaginations. He claimed that children would not share these worlds because it was "as impossible a business as if [they] were bidden to sing in colour or to paint in the odours gathered from the garden." I would like to thank our students for attempting "this impossible business", all 4,798 of them.

FOOTNOTES:

1 'Early New Zealand findings in the IEA Written Composition Study', paper given to IEA General Assembly, Auckland, August 1985.

"Believe It or Not: Student Views of their World". Paper presented to the 1986 Conference of the New Zealand Association for Research in Education, Hamilton, November 1986.

2 This review of school structures and programmes sought widespread public discussion; over 30,000 responses were received.

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Palmer P. — Girls and Television, Social Policy Unit, New South Wales Ministry of Education, Sydney, Australia, July 1986.